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THE INFLUENCE OF CREATIVE DESIRE UPON THE ARGUMENT FOR IMMORTALITY

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Human curiosity first serves the self-centered impulse to seek objects which cause pleasure and to avoid objects which threaten pain. In proportion to the growth of ethical repressions of crude impulse and cultural sublimations of infantile desire, curiosity has been diverted to problems in the external world. Civilization has involved a severe limitation of the open play of fantasy and the direct satisfaction of desire. Only by means of elaborate religious, artistic, and scientific disguises can the primitive desires escape. Indeed the aim of scientists is to discover fact even when fact contradicts the deepest desire.

Since many precious wishes have been hidden below consciousness, it is clear that the psychological study of the unconscious inevitably arouses great affective opposition. This is an obvious factor in some of the adverse criticisms of Freudian theories. In some cases the unconscious opposition is strong enough to prevent the severe renunciation of pleasure involved in accepting the new hypotheses. In other cases the admission of unwelcome facts has to struggle against the rationalizations and moralizations of primitive impulse and self-centered desire. The struggle is strongly marked in the artistic temperament which delights in new symbolic representations of unconscious desires and in imaginary association of pre-conscious impressions. The creative artist has a strong will to live which is symbolized by belief in survival of death. Moreover the artist tends to be conscious of the poverty of his expressions in comparison with the wealth of his impressions. He will therefore be almost overwhelmed by the smallness of his productions when he learns that all his previous experiences have been impressed and preserved in his subconscious mind.

Such, it would appear, is the feeling of M. Maeterlinck, who has recently published his views about the preservation of impressions in what he terms the subconscious mind. The poet accepts the facts which he uses as a new way of rationalizing the belief in survival which satisfies his deepest desires. The weight of these desires may be estimated by their power to

obscure the poet's critical judgment on matters of fact. M. Maeterlinck's reason for belief in survival is similar to the argument based on the premisses that justice is supreme and that an enormous amount of conscious ability is destroyed by death before it is able to do its good work for the world. M. Maeterlinck modifies this argument by putting his emphasis on the waste of unconscious mental energy, and by substituting natural economy for divine justice. The poet as psychologist knows that the conscious waste of material represents but a small part of the vast mass of unused subconscious material in even the longest human life.

M. Maeterlinck has recently argued that man's unconscious soul survives his conscious and bodily death. His argument appears to rest on two premisses—a fact about the extent of man's wasted unconscious life, and a belief about the nature of organic life in general. The fact is proved by a very large number of observations made by hypnotists and psychoanalysts: and it is this. A countless number of sensations are preserved at subconscious levels of the mind, either in temporal succession or in more elaborately associated groups. The subconscious part of the psyche is therefore enormously larger than the conscious organ of perception and memory. From the immense and ever increasing subconscious accumulation there rise to consciousness only a few fragments, as memories, fantasies, jokes, automatisms, intuitions, or symbolic images. M. Maeterlinck stands in wonder before the store of psychic material revealed by recent research. With his vivid imagination the poet pictures the boundless possibilities for mental creation that are involved. His aesthetic conscience refuses to contemplate the final loss of so great a hidden treasure. Even the most productive genius cannot use every impression that has sunk into forgetfulness for lack of the appropriate stimulus for its recollection and use. Therefore, argues M. Maeterlinck, the retention of so many impressions is a useless mental process under the conditions of bodily life on earth.

At this point the poet seems to have been carried away by his emotional reaction to the new knowledge, and to have made an exaggerated statement about the uselessness of subconscious impressions. Certainly not every impression returns through the normal memory of even the oldest and busiest thinker. But the majority of subconscious impressions are at any time available for conscious use if required. The only exceptions are a few unpleasant or disgusting impressions which have been so deeply pressed into the unconscious that neither they nor their associated impressions can be recalled by memory. The unemployment of such undesirable images, however, is surely no loss which calls for a compensatory opportunity in a future

life. Of the vast majority of impressed experiences that lie within the limits of conscious recall, it is possible that any one may become a valuable memory in order to serve some individual or social purpose—to save a life, to compose a poem, to make a joke, to construct a theory or a machine. Any selective process in the subconscious might fail to include and preserve ideas or images that could be used again to preserve or enrich the personal and the collective life. Nature is a bountiful provider. No expenditure is extravagant if only it is directly or indirectly a means to the preservation and transmission of life. Millions of seeds are produced in order that a small minority may survive. It is better that countless germs should perish than that one should be lacking when required to subserve the instinct for the preservation of the species. Likewise it is worth M. Maeterlinck's keeping a subconscious packed full of idle words and images if, by a stroke of genius, some few may rise to conscious life as the elements of a poem or a play.

We are now in a position to estimate the validity of M. Maeterlinck's second premiss, which he asserts as if it were an undisputed scientific law: "It is admitted that Nature does nothing that is useless." This unqualified negative proposition is certainly not admitted by the present writer. There spring to his mind pictures of many monstrous products of Nature—useless additional limbs, innate morbid impulsive tendencies and instinctive disharmonies which have no value for the organism or the species as a whole. No doubt such entirely useless structures and modes of behavior are exceptions. The majority of organs and functions in Nature have at one time some degree of usefulness to the species. The appendix was not always a dangerous relic. And the tendency of organisms to produce a sudden variation of form or instinct usually promotes survival though it occasionally makes a self-destroying monster.

M. Maeterlinck's argument would be stronger if he could show that all the subconscious impressions are useless for earthly life. But he knows the loss to be only partial—thanks to memory and creative intuition. Now if many seeds are wasted in order that a few may be used, the natural inference of a mind unbiassed by unconscious desire would be that a host of subconscious impressions may be held in readiness to form a useful thought or a beautiful deed. M. Maeterlinck's premiss is so inaccurate as to invalidate his argument from the supposed uselessness of the subconscious impressions that a strictly utilitarian nature must provide another sphere of usefulness for the unconscious after death. Moreover, the usefulness of a subconscious impression is not wholly dependent upon its regaining consciousness. The psychoanalytical study of behavior has

made it probable that subconscious impressions when they become the images of desire indirectly play an important determining part in every act of judgment, choice, creation, and appreciation. The capability for attention, no doubt, strictly limits the recall of images; but M. Bergson showed forgetfulness to be useful for practical life. If memory were complete, choice and action would have an impossible task.

The biologist might be satisfied to have shown the weakness of M. Maeterlinck's argument. The psychologist's interest is by no means exhausted till he has gone a step further and explained the use of so weak an argument by so strong a mind. M. Maeterlinck is indeed only one instance of the paradox that eminent men often give illogical reasons for their belief in immortality. We must therefore generalise our enquiry and ask what it is that leads even men of genius to overlook the inadequacy of their reasons for this particular belief. The answer is given by the psychoanalysts, who have proved that men's reasons for belief in survival are unconsciously influenced by the desires they imperfectly conceal. The basic motives for the refusal to contemplate the annihilation of the ego are neither logical nor moral. The fact is, as Dr. Ernest Jones declares, that "in the unconscious every one believes in the omnipotence of his thoughts, in the irresistibility of his charms and in the immortality of his soul." The unconscious is not concerned with moral and metaphysical reasons for survival. The unconscious feels the primitive will to live. Death has no meaning for this level of the psyche, which refuses to think of the extinction of itself and of the objects to whom its love and interest have been transferred. In the unconscious dream-thoughts men appear to be alive many years after their death; time is abolished and the ego only "dies" or disappears in order to be reborn. The conscious arguments are therefore after-thoughts or rationalizations of the primitive wishes. The great unconscious weight of lowly psycho-biological desires accounts for the acceptance of many an argument, that, without this support, would be spurned by all intelligent men. Likewise the will to believe in survival without proof or *quia impossibile* is due to the unbounded egoism of the unconscious mind. Religious faith in the eternal moral values of the soul has its roots in the supreme worth of the unconscious ego in its own estimation; and belief in immortal life is a barrier against the fearful thought of wasted powers—powers which seem immense and are checked and limited by an indifferent world. A rationalistic psychology has supposed that the original cause of belief in immortality was the false reasoning of primitive man who believed he saw his dead friends alive in the world of his dreams. The new psychology, which seeks for wishes beneath thoughts, declares that

the savage saw his dead living in dreams because he could not conceive the intolerably unpleasant thought of the annihilation of those who ministered to the pleasure of his beloved and immortal self. The non-existence of time for the unconscious mind is proved by the fact that for many years after their death some parents continue to exercise a repressive and harmful influence over their family who only consciously accept the fact of their freedom, and show their bondage and fear in the dream-products of their unconscious life. An expression of the adult's unconscious refusal to face the fact of death sometimes openly appears upon the lips of the child. The following conversation reported by Dr. Jung makes this clear.

Anna, aged three, asks: "Grandmamma, why have you such faded eyes?"

Grandmamma: "Because I am old now."

Anna: "But that means that you will be young again."

Grandmamma: "No, I shall get older and older, you know, and then I shall die."

Anna: "Yes, and then?"

Grandmamma: "Then I shall be an angel."

Anna: "And then will you become a little child again?"

In night-dreams and to some extent in day-dreams is realized the desire of the self-centered psyche for a free and endless exercise of its powers in a perfect world. In metaphysical opinions and religious hopes the unconscious wishes have to compromise with the scientific interest in external reality. In men of poetical imagination like M. Maeterlinck, we see the fight of self-love for dominance, and the consequent imperfect rationalization of unconscious desire. M. Maeterlinck, we conclude, is led to use bad reasons in support of his belief in immortality because this belief is a necessary symbol of his unconscious desires, which dominate the thoughts in his conscious creed.